



VOICE

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A STORY OF THE HEART



By Brian Deuster, District Manager of Cape Girardeau DD

I had just driven 17 hours, returning home from a Florida vacation to find myself at a hospital express care center to get a prescription for a sore throat. As I waited, I passed out and fell into a chair. That split second changed my life; I had become that someone else.

A nurse called for help and a wheelchair, and I was moved to the emergency room. As I reached the room, I passed out again. A cardiologist informed me that I needed an angiogram and a stent. Given my medical knowledge, I had doubts about this treatment. I was 45 years old and had never had any serious illness or chest pain, yet the cardiologist said I needed these procedures to prevent a heart attack. I had the angiogram. My arteries were clear, and I was released the next day.

Life was good, or so I thought. I began noticing a sharp pain in my calf as I walked. The further I walked, the greater the pain became. When I stopped to rest, the pain went away. I saw a cardiologist who tested my lower extremities with a resting Doppler and ultrasound. The testing confirmed reduced blood flow in my right lower extremity and a nicked artery, or fistula, in the vein and femoral artery. When the fistula was surgically repaired, my heart started racing. An appointment was made for me to see an electrophysiologist in October 2007.

In the meantime, I was sent home on an event monitor that records an EKG when a button is pushed. I didn't notice any changes in my heart rate but thought I should make a few recordings. So, after a few days had gone by, I pushed the button. Shortly after that, a cardiologist called my house and instructed me to take an ambulance to the hospital. Feeling fine, I ignored the advice and had my wife drive me.

During this visit, I was diagnosed with ventricular tachycardia. This often leads to ventricular fibrillation, which can result in sudden cardiac death. I spent 11 days in the hospital and had an ablation and a cardiac biopsy, and a defibrillator was implanted. The biopsy was nondiagnostic. They thought cardiac sarcoidosis or a virus had scarred my heart. Either way, my left ventricle was severely scarred, which interfered with my heart's electrical current. This meant that my heart ran very fast, faster

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When we read or hear tragic, life-changing stories, we are thankful that those things happen to someone else.

In late July 2007, I became that someone else.

A Story of the Heart

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than 200 beats per minute for sustained periods, even hours.

I returned to work and traveled to a supervisors meeting. I was sitting in a chair in my hotel room when my defibrillator went off six times. I spent the rest of the meeting in the hospital. They say a defibrillator is like insurance; it's good to have just in case you need it. One thing for sure, it's a heck of a wake-up call.

I was able to work and function reasonably well until May 2008. I went to see the electrophysiologist and was given a second event monitor. Over the next few days, I made a few recordings and was again sent to the local hospital. This time, I took the ambulance to Barnes Hospital. I was again hospitalized for ventricular tachycardia, but this time I had a nine-hour surgery to correct the abnormal electrical pathways. I was in the hospital for 11 days.

After being released, I started getting tired when I walked. I had difficulty walking up even a slight grade. I went back to Barnes in July, and I was barely able to walk from the car to the emergency room due to shortness of breath. I could not breathe even while propped up. I found out I was in right-sided heart failure. The speed of my left ventricle had worn out the right side of my heart. The doctors were able to stabilize my condition, but they said that without a heart transplant I only had about two weeks to live. I was convinced that I was not going to survive.

All types of medical tests were performed to ensure that I qualified for a transplant. After a team of physicians, nurses and social workers determined that I was a qualified candidate, I was placed on the transplant list.

I thought this would never be approved by my insurance, but it was within a matter of a few hours.

I spent the next couple of days worrying about receiving a heart. They could keep me in the hospital for up to 10 days at the highest priority on the transplant list. After that, I would be sent home with an implanted pump to improve my heart's function; they could also do another ablation to slow down its rhythm.

I was told that they had a heart on my fourth day on the waiting list. A lot of patients wait months. I was blessed and did not have the misfortune of having to wait and worry, but I did have my doubts. Could something else be done? I had to make a decision almost immediately. I spent days

*“I have a button that says,
'Don't take your organs to
Heaven; Heaven knows we
need them here.'”*

and nights praying and crying for answers. Even so, I was positive (and still am today) that having to make a quick decision was better than waiting for months on the transplant list.

I had the surgery, which lasted about six hours, on Aug. 5, 2008. I spent one day on a ventilator. By the third day, I was walking down the hall a distance of about 50 feet while hanging on to a wheelchair. I had an external pacemaker with leads running into my new heart. I was started on about 15 different medications. (I continue to take 13 medications, many of them twice a day. There are two anti-rejection medications that I will take for the rest of my life.)

I came home on Aug. 15, 10 days after my transplant. I thought the pain from having

surgery would hurt the most, but I found that my symptoms of neuropathy caused me more discomfort. Anti-rejection medications have common side effects such as high glucose levels, hypertension, swelling, tremors and symptoms similar to neuropathy in the feet. As the neuropathy improved, my chest-wall pain became more noticeable. I spent months sleeping in a recliner because I could not lie on my side. I rarely have chest-wall pain now, maybe a little if I sneeze. Over time, most of my symptoms have improved, though my feet continue to bother me and I still have some fine tremors.

Sleep did not come easy at first. I was up at least two times a night due to the side effects of the anti-rejection medication. I was weak and lightheaded due to my blood pressure medication and from the complications of a slow heart rate. My heart was beating in the upper 50s, which made it difficult to stand and walk. Walking and standing are not problems for most transplant patients since their heart rates are usually around 100-110.

My doctor thought that maybe my sinus node had been stitched through during the transplant procedure, resulting in a partial electrical block. Apparently all heart tissue looks the same, and it is impossible to tell exactly where the sinus node is located. My doctor mentioned that I might need a pacemaker, which is unusual but does happen. I went to rehab and waited a few months to see if my heart rate increased. My maximum heart rate reached 85 after 12 minutes of exercise. During the three months of rehab, I had an exercise time of 48 minutes at each session, and my heart rate never increased above 85.

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A Story of the Heart (Continued from p.2)

On Nov. 12, I received a pacemaker. It made a dramatic difference in my ability to function, stand and walk. I still have problems if I stand too fast or walk up a flight of stairs. I am hopeful this will improve.

After my transplant, my life and medical treatments developed a schedule of their own. At first, I had an echocardiogram and a cardiac biopsy every two weeks. I now have these tests once a month. After 12 months, I will have these procedures once or twice a year. I will also have an exercise stress test and an angiogram once a year.

My life has changed, but I am already pretty functional. I returned to work on Dec. 15. I owe a great deal of gratitude to my donor and his family, my surgeon, and the physicians and nurses who cared for me. They have given me a second chance at life. I am very thankful to my wife, Debbie. She has spent countless hours over the past year taking care of me at my bedside and driving me to Barnes. My DDS family has been supportive and comforting as well. I have close friends who visited often, and I received gifts and cards from each office. Most of all, I had prayers from everyone. There were congregations and churches I did not know that were praying for me. The power of prayer is amazing.

I have a button that says, "Don't take your organs to Heaven; Heaven knows we need them here." Organ donors truly save lives. It is likely an organ donor will save the life of someone each of us knows. There are not nearly enough donated organs, but I hope that someday this will change.



Former VR client Phillip Smith (left) talks to Paul Altsheler (right), a job development and job coach with Judevine. Altsheler worked to help Smith adjust to his job at Target.

Making It Work

*By Cody Thomas, Counselor II,
St. Louis West VR*

It was a team effort that led to Phillip Smith's job at Target. His mother, Kathy, spotted the opportunity for her son who has autism; VR supported it; and the Judevine Center for Autism in St. Louis interfaced with the store in Town and Country, Mo., to find him long-term employment.

The placement came about in July after Smith's mother grabbed an application from the soon-to-open store in Town and Country. The job, doing stock and custodial work, meshed well with what was learned about Smith in assessment. He was attracted to a job where he would carry a walkie-talkie and use a handheld PDA for inventory.

After Target hired Smith, Paul Altsheler, a job development and job coach with Judevine, began working with Smith to identify areas for improvement and to help the young man adjust to his job.

For example, Smith (like many others) found that cleaning

restrooms was not his favorite thing to do. Altsheler developed a reward strategy whereby Smith would have the opportunity to work directly with customers and co-workers after completing the less-favorable chore.

Management observed Altsheler's work and discussed the principles and practices he used. Ultimately, management accepted Smith's special-needs support as a management responsibility. After an abbreviated period of job coaching by Altsheler, Store Manager Daniel Hettenhausen took responsibility himself for understanding Smith's needs and for providing informed natural supports. Altsheler will remain available if a need for new problem-solving arises.

The entire process has developed an educated employer and guaranteed an active relationship between the store and Judevine. And, for his part, Smith has turned out to be a great employee – he was named Employee of the Month for December.

In this section, consumers, partners/suppliers and division employees can voice their opinions, views or appreciation to our division and staff. Some letters will be printed in their entirety while longer letters might only have excerpts printed. Consumers' names are omitted to protect their confidentiality. All letters are subject to editing.

Consumer feedback from a letter received by Joyce Carter, district manager in the St. Louis DD office

I wanted to write you in reference to my experience in dealing with Ms. Bennett and the Social Security Administration. I was very concerned that we were going to be dealing with a big, bureaucratic agency; and that it would take a lot of time and red tape to get through the process. I also felt that we would probably be treated like a number. I was astonished at the compassion that Ms. Bennett showed toward our case. I didn't feel like a number, and she always answered my questions and/or concerns with dignity and respect.

Wow, this is what I would expect in the private sector but not in a large government agency. I want to commend Ms. Bennett for her compassion, professionalism and mostly for treating me like a fellow human being.

Angela Bennett is a counselor I in the St. Louis DD office.

Consumer feedback

Dear Lydia Mitchell,

When I came to you, I really did not know what to expect.

Now that I can look back, I feel great about coming to Vocational Rehabilitation. With your help, plus Life Skills, I have found a job that I am taking pride in, and a job that I know I have a good future with and a place that I can see retiring from.

Your thoughtfulness, understanding and being a caring person have helped in many ways. I would like to thank you, Lydia, for all you have done and kept up over the months.

Lydia Mitchell is an assistant district supervisor in the St. Louis West/Transition VR office.

Mark Bernskoetter, district manager in the Springfield DD office, submitted the following comments from a consumer's phone message

The phone message indicated that the consumer was so thankful for what Pam had done, and that no one had been so thoughtful and helpful in the two years they had been dealing with his claim. He was very appreciative.

Pam Chandler is an assistant district supervisor in the Springfield DD office.

Comments from Jennifer Howe, assistant district supervisor in the Kansas City DD office

Diane Moresi was very professional and compassionate when dealing with a difficult claimant today. A claimant called and became upset at the amount of time it was taking to process his case. Diane explained that she had been assigned his case for 23 days, and she gave him an update

on the progress she had. The claimant became very upset and made a suicidal threat.

Diane, acting with compassion and concern, made every attempt to keep him on the phone while contacting me for assistance. When the claimant hung up on her before a phone trace could be done, Diane remained calm while making several phone calls to emergency personnel and the third party contact.

In the end, the Jackson County Sheriff's Department dispatched a patrol car to the claimant's home. Diane was calm, polite and concerned for the safety of the claimant.

Diane Moresi is a counselor II in the Kansas City DD office.

Consumer feedback

Dear Elizabeth,

I wanted to say thank you once again for the opportunity you have given me. My outlook on life has changed quite a bit after going to school and living on my own again. Although I will never return to the life before my injury and every day is difficult, I have nearly stopped looking in the rearview mirror; and I am now focusing on the road ahead. I attribute much of this mind-set to you and your overwhelming support through my current endeavor.

People like you and the organization you work for don't ever get the thanks they deserve. Obviously my close family has been very supportive, but it would have never happened without you.

Elizabeth Smith is a counselor II in the Cape Girardeau VR office.

Staff Achievements

Kristin Donze, counselor in the Sedalia VR office, received the Patients are the Best Teachers Award in April from the University of Missouri School of Medicine. The award was presented during a luncheon in Columbia. Donze's 6-year-old son, Nathan, is a patient at the University of Missouri Hospitals and Clinics.

Lyadonna Hadder, counselor in the Joplin VR office, became a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor in November 2008.

Melanie McDonald-Student, counselor II in the Springfield South VR office, became a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor in November 2008.

Yvonne Wright has been named as the new assistant director of workforce development. She will continue as the district supervisor for the St. Joseph VR office.



Glenn Smith (right), counselor II in the Kansas City East VR office, received the Bill Buell Memorial Award in October 2008 from the Brain Injury Association of Missouri (BIA-MO). The award recognizes VR professionals who are dedicated to helping brain injury survivors have a rewarding future. Dr. Tom Martin (left), president of the BIA-MO board of directors, presented Smith with the award.



(From left to right): John Logan, Tony Logan's son; Karla Bunch, district supervisor of the Joplin VR office and TILC board president; and Andrea Logan, Tony Logan's wife.

Anthony M. Logan Lifetime Achievement Award

Last fall, Doug Glynn was presented with the Anthony M. Logan Lifetime Achievement Award during the annual board meeting of The Independent Living Center (TILC) in Joplin. This award recognizes individuals in the community who have made significant contributions to people with disabilities. Glynn had previously served on TILC's board of directors for seven years. He retired from the Social Security Administration after 27 years and spent more than 13 of those as an administrator. Glynn continues to work part time as an aftercare counselor at the Thornhill-Dillon Mortuary in Joplin, and he also volunteers at several locations in the area.

The award is named for Tony Logan, former district supervisor of the Joplin VR office, who died the month before the 2008 board meeting. Logan had received the TILC Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005, and the organization renamed the award in Logan's honor because of his commitment to serving others. The award was presented on Oct. 23, which happened to be Logan's birthday.



(From left to right): Doug Glynn; Karla Bunch; and Jeff Flowers, TILC executive director. Bunch presented Glynn with the Anthony M. Logan Lifetime Achievement Award on Oct. 23, 2008. The award was renamed in honor of Logan, the former district supervisor of the Joplin VR office who died in September.

Service Awards

Please take a moment to congratulate the following for their years of dedicated service to our division. These milestones were reached between October 2008 and March 2009.

Five Years

Georgeta Dacila, billing specialist II, Jefferson City DD

Geri Millsaps, counselor I, Cape Girardeau DD

10 Years

Monica Bax, counselor II, Jefferson City DD

Sharon Falter, counselor II, Jefferson City DD

James Higgins, district supervisor, Kirksville VR

Jennifer Kenkel, counselor II, Springfield DD

Eunice King, secretary II, St. Louis DD

Sharon Loveland, senior counselor III, Sedalia VR

Keven W. Worthington, counselor III, Springfield DD

15 Years

Michael Schiffner, assistant director, MIDAS training, Jefferson City DD

Karen Surface, secretary II, Cape Girardeau DD

Barbara Watkins, secretary II, Kansas City East VR

20 Years

James Ankrom, district supervisor, Kansas City North VR

Cozett Hill, administrative assistant II, Kansas City DD

Mission Champion Award

The Mission Champion Award recognizes exemplary employees who go above and beyond the agency's mission by performing outstanding service. The award is based upon the employee assisting other staff, consumers and/or partners in exceeding the agency's mission in the areas of customer service, employment outcomes, case management or other services as deemed appropriate by the employee's immediate supervisor.

October 2008

Suzanne Batchelor	Counselor III	Cape Girardeau DD
Melissa Hunter	Counselor II	Kansas City DD

November 2008

David Showalter	Counselor II	Kansas City Downtown VR
Denise Weaver	Counselor II	Jefferson City VR

December 2008

Charolette Thieme	Secretary III	Kansas City Downtown VR
Rob Zirfas	District Supervisor	Chillicothe VR

February 2009

Michelle Mellody	Counselor I	Kansas City Transition VR
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March 2009

Kathy Biesemeyer	Counselor III	Kansas City DD
Ginger Gardner	Billing Specialist II	Joplin VR
Sherry Sissom	Billing Specialist II	Cape Girardeau DD
Karri Wilson	District Supervisor	Sedalia VR

25 Years

Leslie Garcia, regional manager, St. Louis West/Transition VR

Therese Roseburrough, professional relations officer, Kansas City DD

30 Years

Deborah Moad, secretary III, Jefferson City DD

Sheila Simon, secretary III, St. Louis West/Transition VR

Clarinda Unger, coordinator, client services, Central Office VR



Michelle Scherer, DDS administrator, presented an overview of the disability determinations program during training for new VR counselors in October 2008. The training was held at the district office in Jefferson City.



In Remembrance



Renee Lucas, a dear friend to all of her co-workers in the division, died on Jan. 23, 2009. Lucas was a billing specialist II in the St. Louis South VR office. She worked with the agency for more than 19 years, beginning as a secretary in 1989 at the age of 18.

Toby Eckert, district supervisor of Lucas' office, remembered Lucas as someone who "graced us with a generous smile" and had the "tolerance of a saint."

Karen Klenke, Lucas' former supervisor and current district supervisor of the St. Louis West/Transition VR office, said, "(Renee's) smile lit up the room, and she always had a kind word to say to everyone. She always thought of others and tried to be helpful in any way she could. Renee was a caring and kind individual. She was a deeply dedicated employee, a valued co-worker and a one-of-a-kind friend. She will be truly and deeply missed."

Lucas is survived by her husband, Sonny, and two daughters, Brooke (age 13) and Megan (age 10). A scholarship fund for Brooke and Megan has been established. Donations may be made to the Megan and Brooke Lucas Scholarship Fund, U.S. Bank, 110 W. Lockwood Ave., St. Louis, MO 63119.



Renee Lucas, billing specialist II in the St. Louis South VR office, passed away in January. She started with the agency in 1989 at the age of 18. Lucas is survived by her husband and two daughters.

The VR Voice... ...is your voice!

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